

'This is our future'; Students across the country join activist Greta Thunberg to strike for climate action

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Body

In Toronto, they danced in the streets. In Montreal, they heckled Justin Trudeau. In Calgary, they marched in gas masks in the rain.

But everywhere, the message was clear: their house is on fire. The planet is burning, and the adults who hold the power must act now before it's too late.

Thousands of young people, from toddlers to teenagers, took to the streets Friday in at least 85 Canadian cities and in dozens of other countries around the world for a massive global climate strike to draw attention to the world's lack of action on climate change.

Inspired by teen activist Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement, they held signs that read, "Boomers, we will not forgive you" and chanted, "There is no planet B."

Thunberg, who joined the march in Montreal, started the global movement for students last year, encouraging them to leave class in her native Sweden. But on Friday it widened, as parents, grandparents, teachers and friends, faith groups and Indigenous leaders, and even some corporations joined the call for climate action.

In Toronto's east end, Arianna Moodie gathered students outside Riverdale Collegiate Institute, handing out green felt pins as they prepared to board a streetcar and head to the rally at Queen's Park.

A green stuffed turtle peeked out of the pocket of Moodie's grey blazer.

"It's our mascot," the Grade 11 student said, as her friend Oliver Metz-Strauss talked about ending plastic straw use to save the turtles.

Moodie, 16, said she wanted to go to the strike because it's important.

"It's something that a lot of the adults aren't necessarily taking action on because it's something that doesn't affect them as much," she said. "But it's also empowering for us."

Her friend Sophie Palleja said, "I think it's really important for us young people to show the adults that when you're truly passionate about something then things can change."

"This is our future, this is what our life is going to be. If we don't save it, we won't have much of a future, and that's not OK."

Groups of kids trickled out of the school building, making their way into already packed streetcars.

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At each stop more people, including adults and small children, with signs tied to board as people inside and outside waved to each other through the windows.

Finally, Moodie's group reached Queen's Park where hundreds were gathered and drums were beating.

The teens weaved through the crowd, admiring signs such as one that said, "This isn't what I meant by Hot Girl Summer."

Moodie and Palleja both said their parents were supportive of them skipping school to attend the strike.

"They've always raised me to speak up for what I'm passionate about and that's sort of the reason why I planned it," Moodie said.

Lucas Chattoor, 18, showed up at the Queen's Park rally with his father, Ralph Chattoor, 58. Ralph said he was there to spread the message that we have to "preserve the Earth for the benefit of my son and his children and their children."

Seventeen-year-old Kat Rezek, a Grade 12 student at Leaside High School, was focused on her own future children.

"Something needs to be done very soon," she said. "Our kids are going to have nothing if nothing changes."

Bob Willard, a grandfather from Whitby, carried a sign that read "Grandpas for Future."

"This is so overdue," he said. "We're running out of runway."

Even pets got in on the global call. Rose Tavelli brought her eight-year-old Labradoodle Poncho, who wore a sign saying "I don't want to be a hot dog."

The science is clear that 2020 is a make it or break it year in terms of meeting emissions targets to get to net zero emissions by 2050.

An October 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that in order to keep the Earth from warming no more than 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels, as opposed to two degrees, global emissions of greenhouse gases would need to fall to net zero by 2050. The difference of half a degree is monumental and would have far-reaching impacts in terms of extreme weather, Arctic sea ice and coral reefs.

The marches end the global "week for our future" which included similar rallies last Friday, and an emergency session at the United Nations in New York. Students took to the streets in more than a dozen countries from India to Italy.

Sixteen-year-old Thunberg met briefly with Trudeau behind closed doors Friday morning. She told reporters afterwards that she'd told him what she tells all world leaders: "Just listen to the science."

The marchers have a concrete list of demands, including saying no to new oil and gas projects and cutting emissions to a quarter of what they were in 2005 by 2030.

At a speech to a massive Montreal crowd, Thunberg said she estimates more than 6.6 million people took part in climate strikes around the world. Canada and Sweden have a lot in common, like hockey and cold winters, she said. They're also both "allegedly" climate leaders.

"In both cases, it means absolutely nothing," she said to loud cheers. "Because in both cases it's just empty words."

As she went on to describe the amount of greenhouse gases countries have left to emit before the Earth sees a 1.5 C increase in global temperatures, the crowd quieted.

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"We are not in school today, you are not at work today, because this is an emergency," she said. "We will not be bystanders."

The UN summit has disappointed the strikers, she added, "so today we are millions around the world striking and marching again and we will keep doing it until they listen."

Canadian protests got rolling first on the East Coast, with crowds gathering at Memorial University in St. John's, and at Victoria Park in Halifax, where marchers wound through the centre of the city and ended at the headquarters of Nova Scotia Power. A Mi'kmaq honour song was sung accompanied by a drum beat and the thunderous clapping of a giant crowd.

At noon, Montreal students gathered for the march by the Sir George-Étienne Cartier monument on Parc Avenue, in Parc Mont-Royal close to downtown.

Some accused Trudeau of using the strike as a publicity stunt. "The hypocrisy of this gesture is flagrant," organizers wrote in a statement.

"You are protesting with us against the Trans Mountain pipeline that you bought with Canadian dollars, and against the millions of dollars the government (subsidizes) to oil and gas companies," wrote La Planète s'invite à l'Université, a coalition of university students organizing climate strikes in Quebec. "In other words, you are protesting against yourself."

In Edmonton, more than a thousand people marched to Alberta's legislature, many chanting against pipelines and fossil fuels. One young woman carried a sign that read "If the Jonas brothers can make a comeback so can our climate."

Calgary protesters were not deterred by rain; one group gave CPR to an inflatable globe on a stretcher to call for emergency medical attention to the planet. Vancouver protesters made their way to city hall and then marched about three kilometres, over the Cambie Bridge.

Four of the six mainstream party leaders marched in the strikes. NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh marched in Victoria. Trudeau, Green Leader Elizabeth May and Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet all marched in Montreal.

Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer said there would be Conservative representation at the Montreal march, but he did not attend any events. Maxime Bernier, the only national party leader to deny climate change is a crisis caused by human activity, campaigned in his home riding of Beauce in Quebec.

Canada's current goal is to cut emissions to 70 per cent of 2005 levels by 2030, although Trudeau and May have both promised to exceed that and to make Canada carbon neutral by 2050.

Thunberg sailed across the Atlantic in a zero-emissions yacht to lead the charge. She's been hailed as a climate Joan of Arc by supporters, but mocked by politicians such as Bernier and Donald Trump.

"I don't understand why grown-ups would choose to mock children and teenagers for just communicating and acting on the science when they could do something good instead," she said on Friday.

"But I guess they must feel like their world view or their interests or whatever it is, is threatened by us. We should take as a compliment that we are having so much impact that people want to silence us. We've become too loud for people to handle so they try to silence us."

Back in Toronto as the climate strike began to wind down, the Riverdale C.I. students were happy with the exciting day they had.

"I think my favourite part was standing outside of our school and just seeing the doors open and all of the kids coming out of their classes ... Seeing all the young people who wanted to create this change with us," Palleja said.

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With files from The Canadian Press, Hamdi Issawi in Edmonton, Andrew Jeffrey in Calgary, Ainslie Cruickshank in Vancouver, Miriam Lafontaine in Montreal and Yvette d'Entremont in Halifax.

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